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Building Churches in Armenia: Art at the Borders of Empire and the Edge of the Canon

Christina Maranci

Between the index entries for "Arles" and "arms and armor" in most general studies of medieval art is a thin rectangle of white space. For those seeking "Armenia," this interval is as familiar as it is bleak, for the cultures of the Transcaucasus typically occupy a marginal position, if any, within the study of the Middle Ages. One might blame realities of geography and language: a stony tableland wedged between Byzantium and the Sasanian and Islamic Near East, home to a tongue unintelligible to Greek or Latin ears, Armenia could be perceived as not easily absorbed within the traditional contours of the field. Yet shifts in historiography have perhaps contributed more to its liminal status. Initially assigned by Europeans to the role of Oriental Other, Armenia was championed as an Aryan *Urkultur* in the early twentieth century.[1] Now cast aside, this position nevertheless survives as a potent memory, a memory that has become an obstacle, it seems, to cross-cultural inquiry. At present, the field remains isolated, and discussions of Armenian art and architecture appear almost exclusively in the specialized literature.[2]

Through the exploration of a domed church on the edge of the eastern frontier, Armenia's status as a hinterland comes into question. Greater diversification is certainly an important desideratum: the field of medieval art has for generations privileged the study of Latin Europe and Byzantium, to the neglect of lesser-known but equally vital cultures.[3] The case of Armenia, however, challenges not only the breadth of the canon but also its centers of gravity. For the seventh century, one of the most dynamic theaters for cultural activity occurred not within but at the interstices between imperial worlds (Fig. 1). Located in a militarized zone flanked by warring Greek and Persian forces and the object of early attacks by the Arabs, Armenia produced a group of monuments distinctive both for their abundance and conceptual sophistication. For the art historian, they offer fertile ground for studying the function of visual culture in an era of military conflict.

The Armenian churches are also critical to the field of medieval epigraphy. Exterior inscriptions, written in the Armenian alphabet, provide evidence of public texts at a time when such writing practices were rare in the eastern Mediterranean and Near East.[4] Anticipating what have been referred to as the "stone charters" of Romanesque France, the seventh-century churches of Armenia functioned as constructed documents.[5] Like stone pages set upright, they imprinted the complicated and shifting landscape of the eastern frontier with the authority of the text. In conjunction with relief sculpture, the inscriptions shed new light on the relation between reading and viewing in the Middle Ages. In Armenia, the combined medium did not simply allow for the possibility of multiple interpretations, it was deliberately created to do so. In a highly charged climate, and before diverse and sometimes violent audiences, *heteroglossia* (the coexistence of multiple and distinct voices within a single voice or language) and ambiguity became shrewd diplomatic devices. The Armenian structures thus can generate an alternative picture of the early medieval Christian East, one in which military conflict activated, rather than dulled, the visual and verbal response.

These churches present the additional benefit of furnishing architectural evidence from an era often considered virtually bereft of monuments. Despite the prolific building of the Merovingians, the Baptistery of St-Jean at Poitiers remains one of the few constructions of the dynasty to have survived relatively intact from the seventh century. In contemporary Byzantium, archaeological evidence suggests a sharp decline in building.[6] The historical circumstances certainly bear this out: the era following the reign of Justinian witnessed an extraordinary succession of disasters, including the invasions of the Slavs and Avars, the Persian Wars, earthquakes, and the bubonic plague. The paucity of architectural remains has led one scholar to remark that "one cannot speak with any assurance of the development of Byzantine architecture in the period between about 610 and 850."[7] These words, from Cyril Mango's *Byzantine Architecture*, appear in the opening to a chapter entitled "The Dark Ages."[8] It is doubtful, however, that an Armenian living in the seventh century would have found the era so very dark. The years between about 610 to 680 witnessed a building boom in Armenia, when more than two dozen churches were constructed, many datable by epigraphic and literary sources. This in itself is striking, as Armenia was no less embattled than its imperial neighbor.[9] If one assumes that church buildings are erected only in times of a stable economy and relative peace, these churches are, on the surface, difficult to explain.

At present, though, the surface is all we have. With few exceptions, Armenian architecture has been studied through the lens of formal analysis. Carefully documented by T'oros T'oramanyan in the early twentieth century, the monuments later captured the attentions of Josef Strzygowski. His nearly-nine-hundred-page *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* focused almost exclusively on the origins and diffusion of the domed, centrally planned form, which he perceived as an Aryan creation.[10] Although repelled by the Austrian's ideology, subsequent Armenologists have maintained Strzygowski's formal approach, concentrating on the documentation of monuments and the formation of architectural typologies.[11] These endeavors are important, particularly in light of the vulnerability of the monuments, yet little is known about why and how the seventh-century churches arose.[12] Efforts toward contextualization and inquiries into patronage and reception, now quite normative in other fields, are only rarely attempted by specialists in Armenian architecture and sculpture.[13]

Perhaps it goes without saying that exploration of these

1 Medieval Armenia with the location of Mren (after Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *The Armenians*, New York: Thames and Hudson, 1969, 13, fig. 2)

2 Church of Mren, ca. 640, view from northwest (photograph by Richard and Anne Elbrecht)

questions is critical to our understanding of Armenia in the seventh century. Beyond that, the Armenian churches speak to us about the general landscape of the Christian East at a time when eyewitness accounts were exceedingly rare. The buildings thus function both as monuments and as monumental texts, presenting an unexpected window on one of the most turbulent eras in history. Through their epigraphy, relief sculpture, and architecture, they served as agents in a time of war: affirming alliances, reifying power structures, and transforming complex networks of political and social authority into material presences in the landscape. In their messages of authenticity and legitimacy, the churches shaped and preserved public memory, negotiating among diverse linguistic, religious, political, and ethnic groups. Given the strategic importance of the monuments, they require us to rethink political and cultural concepts of imperial center and explore the ways in which Armenia generated, rather than received, visual ideas.[14]

The church of Mren, rising from a tableland at the eastern edge of modern Turkey, illustrates these notions with particular force (Fig. 2).[15] Erected late in the reign of Emperor Heraclius, Mren provides rare insight into relations between Byzantines and Armenians on the eastern frontier. In its inscription, unusual portal decoration, and centrally planned form, Mren embodied and reflected a series of political and economic negotiations effected between the Armenians and the Byzantine Empire. In particular, the monument functioned to affirm allegiances between Emperor Heraclius and two Armenians: Dawit' Sahaṙuni, a newly appointed imperial official, and the local lord Nersēs Kamsarakan.

The setting of Mren is both grand and bleak. Today, only a few goats and shepherds walk the uninhabited stretches of

3 Church of Mren, interior (photograph by Richard and Anne Elbrecht)

semidesert surrounding the city of Kars, where the cathedral rises some 82 feet (25 meters) into the sky, its tall drum and dome punctuating the horizon line. The site is bounded by two rivers, which have gouged deep canyons into the earth: the Arax River to the south and its tributary, the Akhurean, to the east. Having mounted the plain of Mren, the spectator meets the ghost of a large, bustling town, its presence reduced to vine-choked chunks of masonry. At the cathedral, facing stones have fallen from the walls, in some cases replaced later by sculpted slabs known as *khatchk'ars* (cross stones).[16] Much of the uppermost roofing lies at the foot of the building, and several large seams now rent the fabric of its walls. Most alarming is the collapse of the southwest corner, exposing the interior space to the sun and wind, and rendering the entire structure vulnerable. As of this writing, Mren still stands—but it may not for much longer.[17]

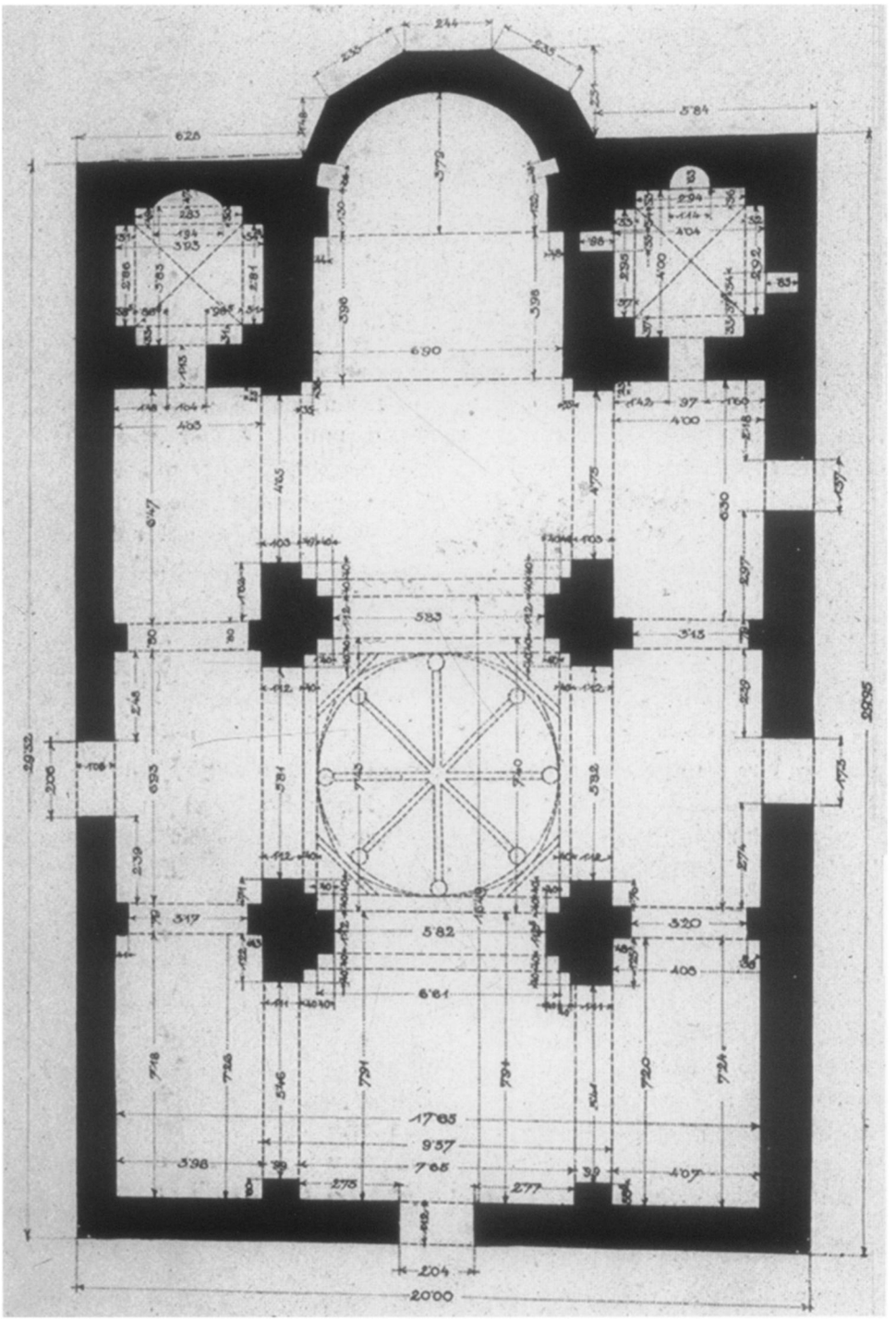
What remains, nevertheless, is imposing: on first viewing, the length of the building is deflected by its height,[18] stressing centrality rather than axiality. Four cross arms mark out the strong upright of the elevation, which is surmounted by a faceted drum. This simple, almost severe massing is enlivened by the portals of the facades, a series of tall arched windows, and many passages of architectural sculpture.[19] Bright polychrome masonry provides further relief from geometry. The pink and gray slabs, some square and some rectangular, cover the walls haphazardly, but often teasingly close to perfect alternation. The scattering of colors, particularly when viewed at middle distance, creates the effect of monumental pointillism: Mren shimmers in the sun and seems to vibrate with life.

Those who enter the church find little to affirm Richard Krautheimer's description of the "cramped" and "hemmed" character of Armenian architecture.[20] Space stretches upward: the cross arms rise high into the narrow curves of the barrel vaults, while the drum and dome, supported on piers, extend nineteen and a half feet (six meters) farther over the central bay (Fig. 3). Fan-shaped squinches, thrown across the corners of this space, find an echo in a smaller set of eight higher up at the base of the dome. At its summit, eight thin ribs meet at the central boss. Supports and arches are richly profiled throughout, repeating the themes of straight and curved lines. Low doors in the north and south aisles lead to a pair of groin-vaulted side chambers (Fig. 4). The apse between them, five-sided on the exterior, presents the viewer inside with a tall, deep space, its dark curve lit by a window piercing the wall above.[21] The surfaces retain passages of plaster, the remnants of a program of wall painting that apparently once extended throughout the church. Christ, now preserved only in head and shoulders, gazes out from the center of the apse, accompanied by four figures presumed to be prophets and a bishop.[22]

In its construction and form, Mren belongs to a family of contemporary monuments in the Transcaucasus built in the rubble masonry technique, featuring geometric exteriors with faceted drums and conical roofs. When viewed next to early Byzantine building in Constantinople and neighboring eastern provinces, the Transcaucasian monuments distinguish themselves sharply. The former are often much larger, their exteriors opened by spacious windows and sheathed in alternate courses of brick and stone. Closer in spirit to the Armenian corpus is the masonry architecture of fifth- and sixth-century Syria, such as the cross-shaped complex of St. Symeon at Qalat Siman and the quatrefoil at Resafa.[23] Yet the size of these monuments, their generous fenestration, and their general use of projecting wings and apses create the effect more of units than unities. In the Armenian churches, by contrast, rectangles, cubes, cylinders, and cones are fused into a crisp verticality and taut, compact planarity, like crystals pushing up from the earth.[24] In plan, the churches are so diverse as to satisfy even the most compulsive typologist: the decades between about 620 and 680 saw the construction of domed halls, basilicas, trefoils, quatrefoils (with or without ambulatories), hexafoils, octofoils, and rotundas. The churches of Gayanē and Bagavan, both usually dated to the 630s, share the layout of Mren, in which a centralized dome rests on four piers within a rectangular vessel.[25]

The Portal Sculpture

More unusual in the context of both Byzantine and Armenian monuments is the exterior sculpture that decorates the church of Mren. The west and north facades are marked with sculpted portals, dated by most scholars to the era of construction, between 638 and 641.[26] On the better-preserved west portal (Fig. 5), a projecting arch, surrounded with vine scrolls, shelters one of the most remarkable sculptural pas-



4 Church of Mren, plan (by T'oros T'oramanyan, in Josef Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa* [Vienna: Anton Schroll, 1918], 184 fig. 221)

sages of the seventh century. Like the archivolt above it, the tympanum, the largest field of the portal, consists of red tuff and is almost entirely taken up by reliefs of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel (Fig. 6). Standing side by side in long cloaks gathered at the shoulder, they hold scepters and orbs[27] and bear elaborately patterned wings composed of horizontal tiers of feathers. Their inscribed names, hitherto unmentioned in the secondary sources, appear to their right and left.[28] In costume and attitude, the archangels at Mren find Byzantine kin in the mosaic at Kiti on Cyprus and in a relief sculpture of Gabriel, probably from the sixth century, in the museum of Antalya in Turkey.[29] In both cases, the angels display an imperial attitude, as though they formed a heavenly guard.[30] Such a conflation of the divine and imperial carried particular resonance on the seventh-century eastern frontier.[31] At the time of Mren's construction, Byzantine troops, charged with maintaining the borders against attacking Persians, were described by contemporary George of Pisidia as "celestial armies."[32]

Below the tympanum stretches a lintel bearing little resemblance to the thin strips of stone at the bottom of Romanesque portals (Fig. 7). Consisting of a large rectangular chunk of blue-gray tuff, it is close in height to the tympanum above. The lintel is much more damaged, both from expo-

5 Church of Mren, west facade portal (photograph by Richard and Anne Elbrecht)

6 Church of Mren, west portal tympanum, showing the Archangels Michael and Gabriel (photograph by Richard and Anne Elbrecht)

sure to the elements and by the addition of a porch in the thirteenth century. This structure, although no longer standing, has left its mark on the lintel: an imprint arches through the line of figures, battering torsos, arms, shoulders, and faces. The intervals of destruction do not, however, obscure an identification of the scene: Christ appears in full length, slightly left of center, holding a book in his right hand (Fig. 8). As in the tympanum, rhythmic patterns take precedence over naturalistic proportion. Christ's long hair and beard are fashioned from deep, overlapping planes of stone, while striations suggest voluminous draperies. A surplus of the garment is held in Christ's immense left hand before falling in large, bell-shaped folds. Flanking Christ are Saints Peter and Paul, who make the gesture of benediction. Paul, with beard and tonsure, stands to the left holding a book, while Peter carries his keys (just visible below the arch imprint).

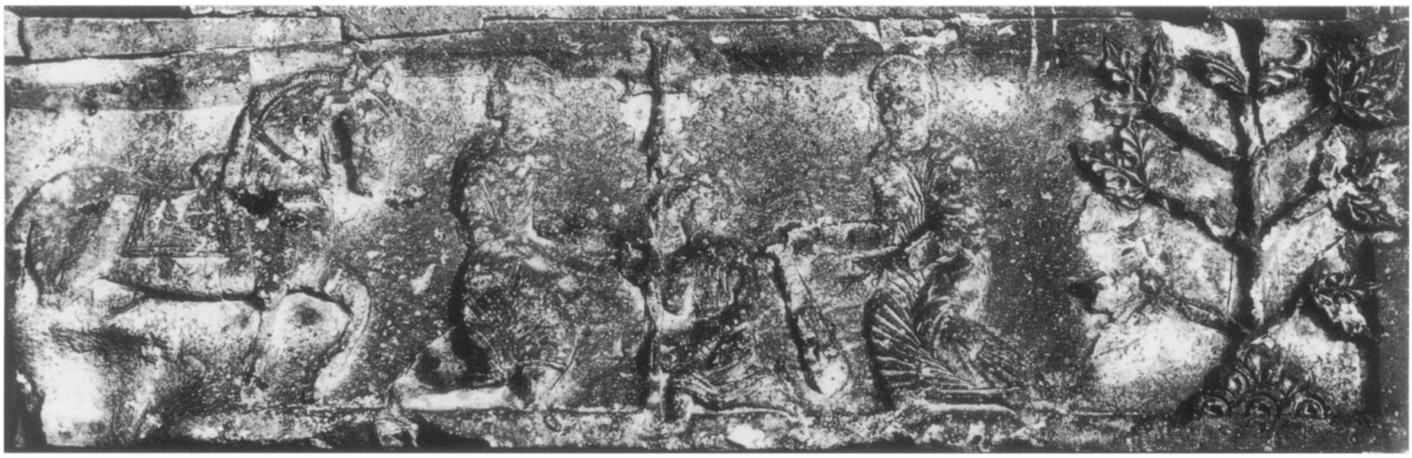
7 Church of Mren, west portal lintel (photograph by Richard and Anne Elbrecht)

8 Church of Mren, west portal lintel, center (photograph by Richard and Anne Elbrecht)

This basic iconographic unit, which may be classified as the *traditio legis,* or "transmission of the law," would have sounded a particularly relevant theme in a climate of alliance brokering.

Accompanying the central group of the lintel are three additional individuals. To the right of Peter is a large standing figure in front view, bisected by a large gash in the masonry. The undisturbed passages describe a man with a short beard in a garment of elaborate folds, holding a book similar to Paul's. Judging from the direction of the drapery pleats and the shape of the lacunae, he appears to be blessing with his right hand, indicating his identity as a member of the clergy. Two parenthetical figures frame those of Christ, saints, and bishop (Figs. 11, 12). Unlike the others, they look toward the viewer while standing in three-quarters position, each gesturing toward the center. Their short forearms poke out from magnificent cloaks, which, although fastened at the shoulders, are only partially worn: neither man has slipped his arms through the sleeves. Extraordinarily long, these appendages hang empty, almost sweeping the groundline of the image. Precisely what this sartorial style meant to a viewer in seventh-century Armenia is not clear; it appears to be a fashion of the Transcaucasian nobility.[33] In addition, extreme care has been taken to evoke the texture of these garments. Whereas the other draperies resemble smooth cloth, the long-sleeved cloaks are rendered as animal fur: tier upon tier of it, from collar to hem. Short vertical marks representing tufts or fibers fill each horizontal panel, forming a patterned surface much like that of the angels' wings in the tympanum. Authority seems to be thus vested in materials: in rich plumage, heavy cloth, and lush fur, creating an aesthetic of tactility that must have been all the more powerful when the portal was better preserved.

With their odd, showy clothes and lively movement, the parenthetical figures at the portal appear to be gate-crashers at the solemn Christian scene. This supposed dissonance has led many scholars to understand the portal as an amalgam of "standard" Byzantine traditions and local elements. Jean-Michel and Nicole Thierry have pointed out the regional character of the west portal, identifying parallels for the aristocratic costumes elsewhere in Armenia and Georgia. Noting the attention to pattern, stocky figural proportions,



9 Church of Mren, north portal lintel (photograph by Nicole Thierry)

and stiff gestures, they assigned the portal to a sculptural tradition typical of the inlands of Asia Minor dating back to the pre-Christian era.[34] In seeking iconographic precedents, the scholars turned to more distant sources, finding them in a series of apse mosaics in Italy. For the Thierrys, the apse in the church of Sts. Cosmas and Damian in Rome offers a particularly germane parallel. There, we meet a similarly monumental Christ, with curly hair framing his head and neck, making the gesture of benediction as he gathers up heavy draperies with his left hand. The Thierrys conclude that the relief at Mren represents a regional variant of a common medieval image.[35]

There is nothing inaccurate about their assessment, but one might well apply it to any work of Armenian (or Georgian, or Coptic) art: take a Byzantine formula, convert it to a more schematic style, and add local costumes. Aside from its problematic ideological implications, such an approach invites us to understand the work of art as an admixture of various elements rather than as a cohesive whole. The art of Armenia, with its location between the powerful empires of Byzantium and the Sasanians (and later the Arabs), particularly lends itself to this practice. Since Armenia was trapped in a geopolitical wedge, its images and traditions are often dismembered and ascribed to neighbors. Few scholars explore the region as a locus of cultural production, in which images and ideas were generated or appropriated in response to local conditions. Such an inquiry furnishes critical insight into the context of early medieval Armenia and the role of visual culture on the eastern frontier.[36]

In the case of Mren, it also may aid in understanding one of the most controversial aspects of the monument. Making a circuit around the building, the spectator will discover another sculpted entrance of similar format to that of the main facade. Although the stones of the tympanum appear to have been replaced, the figured lintel, still preserved, shares the same proportions of its western counterpart (Fig. 9). A series of forms and figures stands out from the masonry surface: at the center is a large, long-handled cross held by a small kneeling figure and flanked by two larger men. Both crouch, and the right-hand figure swings a censer. To the left of this group waits a large saddled horse executing a high-stepping gait.[37] At the right is an ornamental tree from whose thin trunk extend long branches terminating in small curled leaves. All these forms are clearly discernible, yet their combination has sustained decades of scholarly debate. While some interpret the scene as an "imaginative and reduced" record of the Recovery of the True Cross, other scholars view it as an image of a consecration.[38] I propose another possibility: deliberate visual ambiguity deployed as diplomatic strategy.

In the process of identifying subjects and sources for the portal sculptures at Mren, it is critical to remember what makes the reliefs so striking: the very fact of their exterior position. The elaborate and sumptuous ornament of Justinianic structures, seen at the Hagia Sophia, Sts. Sergios and Bacchus, and St. Polyeuktos, were primarily confined to interior space, transforming masonry shells into vineyards, leafy gardens, and musters of peacocks. Neighboring regions, though, produced comparable traditions. At Qalat Siman, lintels, arcades, and pilasters animate and unify exterior walls. At the main church of Alahan in Cilicia (southwestern Asia Minor), the spectator standing below the west portal will look up to find a sculpted marble soffit inhabited by two angels in flight.[39] Farther afield but equally important is the sculptural tradition of Coptic Egypt, with its wood and stone lintels of religious and mythological scenes.[40] Among these examples, Mren distinguishes itself both by the capaciousness of the sculptural plane and by the combined use of tympanum and lintel. Even in the contemporary Transcaucasus, this formula is unusual. Until the ninth century, exterior ornament remains largely architectonic, with isolated figural reliefs.[41] The elaborate representational scheme that sheathes the palace chapel of Aght'amar, dating to the tenth century, is extraordinary even by local standards.

The most compelling parallels for the portals at Mren lie, surprisingly, a continent away: the figured tympanum and lintel appear to the modern spectator as a strange Oriental prophesy of Romanesque and Gothic sculpture.[42] Old ghosts haunt this comparison; since the early nineteenth century, scholars have remarked on the formal similarities between the medieval traditions in Armenia and Europe.[43] Blind arcading, pointed arches, and clustered piers at the cathedral of Ani (989–1001) struck travelers as uncannily familiar. Some began to hail the region as the cradle of the Roman-

10 Church of Mren, west facade, inscription (photograph by Peter Brown)

esque and Gothic styles. Others, such as Karl Schnaase, preferred to believe that the Armenian monuments were the work of visiting German builders.[44] East-West connections were made most emphatically by Strzygowski, who examined the origins of the Romanesque in his *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa.*[45] By the second decade of the twentieth century, he accounted for similarities between Armenian and Romanesque forms by a force called the "Northern art stream."[46] Unrelated to latitude, Strzygowski's north was based on the concepts of *Blut, Boden,* and *Lage* (roughly: blood, climate, and situation) and formed part of a vast and racialized geography of art.[47] This formulation permitted the connection of artistic traditions across broad swaths of time and terrain, unconstrained by history or chronology. Reaction to his publications was immediate, vociferous, and often negative: Kurt Weitzmann, among others, dismissed the Austrian who had "turned art history into geopolitics."[48] Nonetheless, Strzygowski's shadow, it seems, has only stretched longer in the successive generations. For the field of Armenian architecture, his persona, perhaps more than his written work, continues to inhibit efforts toward comparative analysis.[49] More than fifty years after the death of Strzygowski, to raise the question of Armenia and the West is to conjure his specter. Our exploration, though, may well elude the specter, as it seeks no northern Atlantis; the aim, rather, is to understand how social and political forces may have motivated the production of similarly sculpted and inscribed exteriors.[50] The case of Mren offers a new lens with which to view the problem of the medieval portal. At the same time, it provides a means to test attendant theoretical issues outside the traditional boundaries of the field.

The West Portal Inscription

Centered above the western tympanum at Mren is an inscription of three lines, spanning nine of the facing stones on the west facade (Fig. 10). In large, carefully incised, uppercase (*erkatgir*) letters, the text relates the date of construction of the church and its intercessionary purpose. It names four individuals: Emperor Heraclius, a prince of Armenia and Syria, the bishop T'eop'ighos, and Nersēs Kamsarakan, the local lord (*tanutēr*):

> [In the 29]th year of the victorious king Heraclius, in the office of Prince [Dawit'] the all-praiseworthy *patrik, kourapalate,* and *sparapet* [of Armenia] and Syria and in the office of bishop [T'e]ovp'ighos and in the office of *tanutēr* Nersēh lord of [Shira]k and Asharunik', this holy church was built [for the intercession] of the Kamsarakank' and Mren and all [——].[51]

The forest of brackets reveals numerous lacunae at critical points in the text, which throw shadows on the completion date of the church and the name of the prince. The surviving text nevertheless establishes a synchronism in which Mren was built, beginning with Heraclius, and followed by the prince, the local bishop, and the local lord.

These data suggest that the church was finished in the 630s. Construction must have taken place after 629, when Byzantine armies had recaptured the area. Also appropriate to this time frame is Heraclius's epithet, "victorious." The title was used frequently after his successful negotiations with the Persians in the 620s and the restoration of the True Cross in Jerusalem in 631.[52] The fourth figure named in the inscription, Nersēs Kamsarakan, commissioned numerous churches in the 630s, including the church of the Theotokos at T'alin.[53] If we date the construction of Mren to this era, the "Prince of Armenia" is most certainly Dawit' Saharuni. The first Armenian, and one of the few to earn this title, Dawit' held the position from 638 to 641.[54]

The text does not name the founder, and scholars have attributed the monument variously to Dawit', to Nersēs, and to other individuals.[55] Perhaps more important is that the inscription identifies three local figures who are most likely also depicted on the west facade portal. The visual, historical, and literary evidence indicates that both the sculpture and inscription announce a network of alliances between the

Armenians and Heraclius. It is likely that each played a role in the construction of the church.

Reconstructing the Network of Alliance

The relationship between the emperor and the nobles was born of the acute political and military turbulence of the seventh-century eastern frontier. From about 603 to 620, the Persians pushed into the Byzantine sector of Armenia and then farther west into Syria and Cappadocia. In the summer of 610 Caesarea fell to their offensives; by 613 or 614, Jerusalem was in Persian hands. Heraclius, installed on the throne in 610, ordered a series of counteroffensives, into Armenia in 624–25 and into Mesopotamia in 627–28. The Sasanian superpower slowly faltered, ceding territories one by one: Jerusalem, Antioch and its environs, Caesarea in Palestine, and much of Armenia itself. It forfeited not only acreage but also the True Cross, which was reinstated in the Holy Sepulchre in 630 amid imperial pomp, great rejoicing, and a flood of tears.[56]

Byzantine euphoria was short-lived. In 634, Arabs launched their initial invasions, and by 636, they had wrested all of southern Palestine from the Byzantines. This defeat, added to problems within the imperial family, seems to have dampened support for Heraclius.[57] A conspiracy arose to oust him and install Athalaric, his illegitimate son, on the throne. Having learned of the plot, the emperor ordered mutilation for the guilty, among whom was Dawit' Saharuni. En route to his punishment, Dawit' broke his bonds, killed his escorts, and escaped. Newly liberated, he returned to Armenia, united the army, and seized control of the Byzantine troops. In response to such boldness, Heraclius awarded Dawit' the titles of *curopalate, sparapet,* and prince of Armenia and Syria.[58]

Dawit' owed his political ascent in part to imperial insecurity.[59] With civil disputes at home, the Persians still threatening the eastern borders, and Arabs advancing swiftly into Mesopotamia, the Byzantines found Armenian allegiance imperative. In his claim to power, moreover, Dawit' had the backing of the Armenian princely clans; Sebeos reports that Heraclius elected Dawit' "at the request of the princes."[60] Support of the nobles was necessary to both the success of Dawit' and to Heraclius's cultivation of Armenian allegiance, for aristocratic families formed the power structure of seventh-century Armenia. From the fall of the Armenian Arsacid monarchy in 428 to the rise of the royal kingdoms in the ninth century, Armenia's princely houses ruled autonomously over their own ancestral domains.[61] Answering to no king, each held specific political titles, levied taxes, and kept cavalry.[62] The princes were thus critical to the success or failure of strategic policy in Armenia.

Political influence was not uniformly distributed among the princes. During the seventh century, the Kamsarakans were the largest landholders of any princely house of Armenia. Related to the Arsacid line, the family and its various cadet branches inherited a substantial portion of the old royal domains: the northern part of Ayrarat, the great block of territory at the center of the country. The Kamsarakans are included in all the later lists of lords, or *nakharars,* and the *Zornamak,* or "Military List," which attributes to them six hundred retainers. Physical signs of their power reside not only in epigraphy but also in the many churches that they commissioned. In consolidating local power, Dawit' would thus have been obliged to pay particular attention to Nersēs Kamsarakan.

Negotiations with the Kamsarakans must have been sweetened by Dawit''s new wealth. In an effort to cultivate strategic alliances, Byzantine and Persian rulers routinely elected Armenian nobles to official positions, and these elections were often accompanied by lavish gifts. When in about 614 the Persian king Khosrov II granted the title of *tanutēr,* or "Khosrov Shum" (the joy of Khosrov), to the Armenian noble Smbat Bagratuni, he presented him with a gem-studded collar, silver cushions, four-keyed trumpets, bodyguards, an army, the Lesser Ministry of Finance, and the right to choose a governor.[63] Although the contemporary Armenian chronicler Sebeos is not explicit regarding Dawit''s takings, his promotion to the highest rank of any Armenian thitherto suggests that he received a generous infusion from imperial coffers. Such generosity was most likely responsible for the "great magnificence" in which we are told he lived while prince of Armenia.[64]

Imperial generosity could include architectural donations, as a number of Byzantine examples attest. In the tenth century, Constantine Porphyrogenitus made a gift of workmen and materials to decorate the qibla of 'Abd al-Rahman's Great Mosque at Córdoba. In 1042, Constantine IX Monomachos began to reconstruct the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem after its destruction by the Arabs.[65] In tenth-century Armenia, Basil II is said to have given Caesarea and Khawatanēk to David, the son of Senekerim.[66] Emperor Heraclius was particularly inclined to present buildings. In the 630s, the emperor donated or contributed to a series of foundations in the provinces. He participated in the construction of an aqueduct and fortifications in Cyprus, a nymphaeum in Crete, and the reconstruction of the citadels in Ankara.[67] In addition to such public works, Heraclius bestowed an architectural gift on a private individual: the Armenian noble Varaztirots'. Sebeos reports that the emperor honored him "more than all the *patriks* that were in his kingdom" and offered him silver cushions, "very many treasures," and "royal residences."[68]

Imperial involvement in the construction of Mren would help to explain the short building phase of three years (corresponding with Dawit''s tenure as prince).[69] Politically, it would have been a shrewd step, simultaneously conveying the generosity and sovereignty of the empire. As with Heraclean donations in Cyprus and western Asia Minor, building in Armenia may have been intended to bolster alliances and authority at the borders. From this perspective, the church of Mren could be construed as a marker of Byzantine presence on the Armenian landscape. In an era of rapid political realignments, Mren would have functioned as an effective sign of imperial leadership, hardened into geometric masses of pink and gray.

A strong religious motivation may have also lain behind Heraclius's putative involvement at Mren.[70] In addition to overcoming the Persian threat, the emperor was committed to creating religious unity among Christian communities in Asia Minor. During the Persian conflicts, he sought to bring the Christians of northern Iraq, the Nestorians of Syria, and

11 Church of Mren, west portal lintel, Armenian noble at left (photograph by Richard and Anne Elbrecht)

12 Church of Mren, west portal lintel, Armenian noble at right (photograph by Richard and Anne Elbrecht)

the Armenians into conformity with Byzantine Orthodoxy. In 621, he succeeded in persuading the Armenian catholicos Ēzr to communicate in the Byzantine manner. Although the patriarchal position did not reflect the mood of the country—and was in fact subsequently reversed—imperial intentions remain clear: to neutralize dogmatic dissent in the Christian East and, in so doing, generate a stronger sense of political accord in that region.[71] Aiding in the foundation of Mren may have been viewed as a further step toward this goal.

Given the historical and visual evidence, we can tentatively reconstruct a set of negotiations among the secular figures named in the inscription. Heraclius was in a position to disburse large sums of money, elite titles, and imperial troops in return for the assurance of Armenian allegiance (particularly important given Dawit'ʻs treachery only a year before). Dawit' received those titles (and the legitimacy they carried), as well as imperial gifts, and offered in return the allegiance and support of the Armenian nobility. The consolidation of local power, moreover, was most certainly achieved with the help of Nersēs, lord of the most powerful clan and vast expanses of strategic Armenian territory. In exchange, Nersēs may have benefited through either direct gifts from Heraclius or a portion of those bestowed on Dawit'. Such funds, finally, may explain the construction of Mren, which was dedicated to the Kamsarakans and located on the family's ancestral estate. That the church served a public and political role may be inferred from the unusual plea for intercession articulated in the second part of the inscription, which requests salvation for the town or city of Mren and "the whole land." This expansive dedication finds no parallel in contemporary Armenian epigraphy.

Image, Text, and Diplomacy on the West Portal

The network of alliance reconstructed above permits a new reading of several elements on the west portal. Paired in costume and gesture, Dawit' and Nersēs create a symmetrical frame for the holy figures between them, and their parity may be understood as an expression of coalition (Figs. 11, 12).[72] The device may have additional implications, possibly preserving evidence of an actual practice of allegiance.[73] In an episode recorded in the fifth-century *Epic Histories* (*Buzandaran Patmut' iwnk'*), the Persian king Shapuh attempts to win the alliance of the Armenian king Arshak. The Armenian is received with great honor and gifts and invited to participate in an elaborate ceremony. Together, the kings recline on "one and the same banqueting throne in the hour of festivity, [wearing] the same garments of the same color with the same insignia and ornaments."[74]

The presence of the bishop T'eop'ighos in the inscription and on the portal is equally suggestive. Unfortunately, little is known of him; he is not mentioned by Sebeos or in other Armenian inscriptions. Nonetheless, his depiction next to

Peter and Paul may indicate not only his clerical status but also the high prestige of the episcopacy in medieval Armenia. Unlike bishops in Byzantium or the Latin West, traditionally assigned by region, Armenian bishops were tied to aristocratic houses, of which they themselves were often members.[75] Their dynamic role in both religious and political affairs is hinted at by the epigraphic evidence: dates of bishoprics are included in the synchronism at Mren, as well as in those of the contemporary churches of Bagaran and Alaman. At the church of Mastara, episcopal tenure is the exclusive means by which the date is calculated.[76] This evidence admits the possibility that the duties of T'eop'ighos extended beyond the liturgical; like his secular cohorts, he, too, may have played a political role in the founding of Mren.

Even the holy figures on the portal reflect and affirm alliances between Byzantine and local power spheres. As seen in apse mosaics, the scene of Christ standing between Peter and Paul is commonly known as the *traditio legis,* or "transfer of the law." Based on imperial imagery, this image type appears on the apse mosaics of Old St. Peter's and S. Costanza, Rome, both from about 370, and on fourth-century sarcophagi in Rome and Ravenna.[77] Variations on the theme include the depiction of Christ enthroned or shown handing a closed scroll to Paul.[78] Consideration of the iconographic evolution of the *traditio legis* and its context, however, is less important here than an inquiry into its initial Armenian appearance at the church of Mren. Previous studies have explained its use as a reflection of the widespread popularity of the subject at that time.[79] Its placement on a curved field has been regarded as further evidence for a link with Roman apsidal spaces.[80]

From a local perspective, it is difficult to ignore how the theme would have resonated at the time of Dawit''s investiture. Just as Heraclius transmitted imperial authority to the municipal level, so Christ transferred his power to the saints, a power, if we are to read the lintel as a whole, that ultimately extended outward to the Kamsarakan bishop T'eop'ighos, Dawit', and Nersēs. Presiding over this transaction are the archangels, keeping watch as divine sovereignty is channeled from the heavens down to the plain of Mren. In light of the immediate political context, there could have hardly been a more felicitous subject for public display.[81]

The variegated sculpted surfaces convey this message in a particularly forceful manner. Bodies lie within the lintel frame, on a uniform plane close to the background field. Heads, by contrast, break through the frame and tilt outward and downward, as if addressing the viewer below. Seemingly insignificant, this device serves to engage the viewer in a specific and immediate relationship with the image, transforming a timeless scene of Christ and saints into the record of a transaction between holy and secular figures at an appointed time and place. The portal sculpture thus succeeds in fixing a series of relationships in both chronological and spatial terms, performing a role similar to that of twelfth-century English charters.[82] In the case of Armenia, authority and allegiance were rendered as a large-scale material entity: built, inscribed, and sculpted.

It is worth remembering that the formation of political alliance does not necessarily denote equality, loyalty, or understanding between parties. Rather, the gesture reflects a desire for security in the midst of crisis, creating the appearance of accord and the mutual coordination of policy for both constituents and the public.[83] This understanding of alliance sheds further light on the inscription and portals at Mren. More than simply statements of accord, they appear to act on a much more complex level, sending multiple messages and negotiating among audiences. The unusual combination of verbal and visual signs is best understood as a response to the ethnic and linguistic makeup of the contemporary Caucasus, which, besides the local community, included the large number of Byzantine soldiers stationed in Armenia at this time. As Walter Kaegi has shown, they formed one of the largest military units of the empire as well as one of the most volatile. Triggered by lack of pay, hostility toward the commanding general or emperor, and losses to the enemy, uprisings were violent and frequent.[84] That troop support was fickle is made clear enough by the fact that only three years after Dawit' was named prince of Armenia, he was discredited by his soldiers and removed from the position.[85] In such an unstable environment, a public display of Dawit''s status would have been critical to his political survival. The site of Mren was, moreover, well known to the Byzantine military: in about 627, Heraclius and his troops marched just five miles east of the plain en route to campaigns in the south. Combining an Armenian inscription with familiar Christian imagery, the church portal may thus have responded specifically to the bicultural world of Mren, in which the coexistence of Greeks and Armenians was simply a reality of the military situation.

Facing diverse and potentially antagonistic groups, the portals at Mren may have functioned as diplomacy in stone. Episcopal and noble personae are both named and sculpted, yet the inscription indicates Heraclius as the primary figure, while the portal features Christ. To be sure, each message operates within specific and prescribed conventions: that of Christian iconography in the case of the portal and that of imperial documentation in the inscription. Intriguingly, this very disjuncture between the two modes of communication creates the opportunity for divergent readings and viewings.[86] Such multiplicity could have served both imperial and local strategies: before a Greek-speaking soldier, the Armenian figures might appear as pious attendants within a Christian scene presided over by imperial angels: a visualization that conveys Armenian political submission and that might even be taken to hint (deceptively) at the acceptance of Byzantine Orthodoxy. The same soldier might further assume that the text above announced these ideas in verbal terms. The Armenian who understood the inscription, either through reading or hearing it spoken, might arrive at a very different conclusion. The incorporation of Armenian nobility into an imperial synchronism may rather have provided a potent sense of local power. In the portal, this impression of municipal authority is heightened by the images of Dawit' and Nersēs in full-length fur coats, standing within a scene of the transmission of the law. These scenarios of reception are only two of countless others, yet they serve to index a powerful and fertile *heteroglossia* that must have stimulated a range of responses within the theaters of military, diplomatic, social, and religious interaction.[87]

The North Portal

A greater level of complexity may inform the north portal lintel of the church, which, as mentioned earlier, has generated two opposing interpretations. For Nicole Thierry, the scene represents the return of the True Cross to Jerusalem by Heraclius. Celebrated throughout the Christian world, this event was greeted with particular fervor in contemporary Armenia: the high emotion of the "holy, wonderful, and heavenly discovery" is vividly expressed by Sebeos.[88] In support of this theory, the invocation of "victorious Heraclius" in the text of the west portal inscription certainly alludes to the emperor's success in recovering the relic.[89] Consequently, the scholar regards the lintel as recording the episode in "imaginative and reduced" fashion: Heraclius appears as the left-hand figure, honoring a cross of ostension held up for display, intended to symbolize the relic. The larger censing figure at right represents Modestos, the patriarch of Jerusalem, who received the relic from Heraclius in 641. Several additional elements persuade her of this identification: a gemmed diadem worn by the right-hand figure, the tree (a symbol of paradise and by extension the Heavenly City), and its triangular base (a reference to the rock of Calvary). The prancing horse, in her view, is most clearly an attribute of empire, signifying the victorious leader.[90]

In the identification of an imperial subject, the above interpretation is the better known of the two, attracting the attention and support of both Armenologists and Byzantinists.[91] Yet several elements of the argument remain problematic. At present, it is impossible to discern a gemmed diadem on the head of the left-hand figure (Fig. 13). The sculptural remains suggest, rather, a bonnetlike hat such as that worn by the right-hand noble on the west portal. What can be detected from the rest of the costume gives no clue to any imperial references.[92] The tree, although intriguingly executed, has an appearance too generic in meaning to demand a single and exclusive interpretation. The horse, on the other hand, certainly possesses forceful imperial connotations—at least when viewed within the paradigm of Byzantine iconography. In the Transcaucasus, however, equines were perhaps the most common attribute and potent symbol of the nobility. Contemporary visual evidence attests to this: on the seventh-century church of Ptghni is a small relief sculpture of a mounted hunter, inscribed "Manuel, Lord of the Amatunis."[93] Furthermore, skills in horsemanship are topoi in descriptions of Armenian aristocracy.[94] An exclusively imperial interpretation of the lintel is thus troubled by problems of internal evidence, on the one hand, and by the uncertain assumption that Byzantine visual conventions prevailed in Armenia, on the other.

Minas Sargsyan proposes another theory, seeing the lintel as a consecration scene peopled by the cleric and nobles named and portrayed on the west portal.[95] According to Sargsyan, the left-hand figure represents not the emperor but Dawit' Saharuni, dismounted from his horse, while the bishop T'eop'ighos swings a censer at the right. Nersēs Kamsarakan, he argues, may be depicted in the small figure kneeling to the right of the cross. In accounting for the different costumes of the figures on each portal, Sargsyan posits a twenty-to-thirty-year interval between the two sculptures.[96] In his view, the west portal was created later, reflecting Dawit' in his new status as prince of Armenia and Syria. Thierry has rightly criticized the last proposition, as Dawit''s clothing on the west portal is not indicative of any particular status beyond that of nobility, which he enjoyed before his promotion by Heraclius. She also notes that Sargsyan's argument does not account for the size differences between the figures he claims are Dawit' and Nersēs, accorded virtually equal height on the portal. Finally, she asserts that the scene does not conform to any known liturgical ceremony of consecration.

13 Detail of Fig. 9

On the contrary, there is ample and intriguing evidence (much of it not adduced by Sargsyan) from both historical and liturgical texts to support the identification of a consecration scene on the lintel. In the fifth-century *History of the Armenians,* the newly converted King Trdat sets about constructing churches: "but he did not draw the foundation or erect an altar anywhere to the name of God, because he did not possess the rank of priesthood. But he simply encircled the places with a wall and set up the sign of the Lord's Cross."[97] In a tenth-century Armenian text entitled *History of the Caucasian Albanians,* an account of consecration also features a cross: "taking the cross of light, [Prince Juansher] put it to rest in the house he had built for it, and there he knelt down and with bitter contrition and tears he prayed to the Creator of all things."[98] The kneeling position mentioned here is particularly interesting, recalling the crouched figures of the north lintel.

Three Armenian liturgical sources, a ninth-century ritual and two eighth-century commentaries, provide detailed accounts of the church dedication ceremony. In a recent study, Father Daniel Findikyan analyzed and collated them to reconstruct the early dedication office of the Armenian Church.[99] In all three instances, the rite involves exiting the

building and performing exterior services equipped with a cross. First, the altar table is placed outside the church, as the congregation gathers around it singing Psalms, after which the altar table is reinstalled within the church and elevated to the bema. After the ceremony of unction, in which the altar is anointed, the consecration continues with the "naming of the church" and the blessing of the exterior. Unknown in Byzantine liturgy, this rite is most interesting for present purposes, as it identifies the church as a specific commission. At this point, the clergy and congregation proceed to the exterior, whereupon the bishop declares in whose name the church has been erected. He then makes a circuit around the church. One of the allegorical commentaries mentions the rite of "tracing the Lord with the cross" on the exterior, which included anointing the four sides of the building.[100]

Contemporary Armenian inscriptions present an additional category of evidence. The exteriors of numerous seventh-century churches bear explicit records of foundation. The texts name not only the donor, purpose, and construction years of the building but also the exact date of the foundation (sometimes including the day of the week). Highly unusual in the context of analogous Byzantine texts, such precision may have facilitated the performance of consecration rites. The careful temporal records may even reflect the absorption of these ceremonies within local annual liturgical cycles. Six of the inscriptions, moreover, possess a striking format. Instead of a block of lines, they form a long line of text girdling the perimeter of the building. This distinctive layout, unusual within medieval epigraphy, necessitates a circumambulatory movement around the building in order to read the text.[101] Such movement most likely took the form of a procession in which a cleric voiced the inscribed texts to an assembled audience.[102]

This evidence certainly encourages the identification of the north portal as a scene of consecration. It also invites the possibility that the image held a performative function, taking part in annual commemorative ceremonies of the event. The two portals, in fact, may have operated as liturgical stations within a procession around the monument. This thesis is particularly tempting since the rite of consecration, according to one of the liturgical sources, involved the anointment of the church portals.[103] Although speculative at present, such a scenario of ritual carries significant implications, casting the Armenian church exterior as a site of memory, performance, and the body.[104]

The historiography of the north lintel offers grounds for discussion as fertile as the subject itself. It is striking that two such antithetical interpretations have been advanced and have until now remained viable. I would like to put forward the possibility that this dissonance is not a reflection of insufficient data, but rather a response to the inherent visual ambiguity of the scene.[105] As with the western facade, it is tantalizing to contemplate the different responses stimulated by the north portal lintel. A Greek speaker, like the Thierrys, may have indeed seen Heraclius. Standing on Caucasian soil and reminded of the ruler's great deeds, this viewer would have certainly felt greater assurance of Armenian fidelity to the empire. For an Armenian, the same image might have recalled the consecration of a church, a rite whose outdoor setting pertained exclusively to local tradition. Such responses were also no doubt shaped by on-site narration, suggestions, or insinuations.[106] The act of viewing and reading at Mren must have formed a dynamic and heterogeneous process in which context, message, and receiver were in constant flux. Seen in this light, the portals can be likened to the account of the Armenian noble who undressed and then donned the "same insignia and garments" in a ritual of allegiance. Both cases provide notable examples of political mediation through visual signs.[107]

Public Texts and the Documentation of Alliance

The political and military climate of Armenia seems to have cultivated not only polysemy but also the production of oaths. Desire for authenticity and the confirmation of alliances were central concerns, as attested throughout early Armenian sources. This attitude is most palpable in the chronicle of Sebeos: page after page recounts episodes of affiliation and treachery, pronouncements of loyalty and subsequent backsliding. It is therefore unsurprising that the historian mentions, with equal frequency, the use of oaths, which are sworn and sealed on no fewer than twenty-six separate occasions in the *History*. When Heraclius sought to form a secret alliance with Khorēam, a Persian governor, he requested "a pact between me and you with an oath, in writing and with a seal."[108] The rise in the production of written documents may have had more to do with the direct consequence of distrust than with social progress.[109]

Oaths were also used in sworn statements of faith: when the patriarch Nersēs attempted to humor Emperor Constans by professing his faith in Byzantine Chalcedonianism, his fellow Armenian clergy, incensed at his betrayal, revealed to Constans that Nersēs could not be trusted. They informed the emperor that Nersēs had recently convened a council condemning Chalcedonianism and contended that Nersēs had composed a "document . . . concerning the faith, and sealed it with his own ring, and then with ours, and then with the rings of all the princes." "That document is with him," they told him. "Order a search made to see."[110] Similarly, the Persian king Khosrov III, unpersuaded of the authenticity of Armenian Christianity, demanded that a document articulating this faith be brought before him. It was found in the treasury, sealed with the rings of previous Persian rulers. Assured of Armenia's religious position, the king ordered a copy of the letter, sealed with his own ring, to be deposited in the royal treasury.[111] In seventh-century Armenia, as in twelfth- and thirteenth-century France and England, the oral performance of the oath did not necessarily confirm any truth. Rather, the oath existed as a physical entity, in the form of written, sealed, and archived documents. In the case of Mren, the document was not sealed and hidden away but engraved on the most public side of the church.

In the study of medieval architecture and public texts, Mren stands as a critical monument. The "textuality" of the building, moreover, is further suggested by the philological associations of the Armenian term for oath, *ukht*. By the fifth century, the word referred to covenants or pacts and carried an additional range of meanings, including "congregation of clergy" and built structures. Churches and monasteries were referred to sometimes as "places of oath" (*ukhti degh*) or, more tellingly, simply as "oaths."[112] It is tempting to imagine

14 Church of Mren, west facade, inscription (from Garegin Hovsēp'ean, *Grch'ut'ean aruestĕ hin hayots' mej K'artēz hay hnagrut'ean* [Vagharshapat: Egek'trasharzh Tparan, 1913], pl. 3, no. 6)

the performance of oaths at church buildings, which were themselves transformed, through their inscribed surfaces, into three-dimensional versions of events. By the seventh century in Armenia, oaths were inextricably linked with buildings. The churches of Armenia thus provide early testimony of the locating, recording, and preserving of communal memory in the Middle Ages.[113]

At Mren, the use of official language and precise chronology in the inscription draws immediate comparison with contemporary written documents in Armenia. Rather than a call to prayer or plea for intercession, the carefully formed, large *erkatgir* script extending across the facade is a date: a long synchronism articulating the concentric spheres of political authority in which Mren was built, from the outermost ring of the imperial to the innermost of the local level, the church itself located in the center (Fig. 14). The main concern, as in the sculpted lintel, involves fixing a moment in time. The chronicler Sebeos was similarly concerned with leaving exact temporal records. He often marked historical moments in a distinctive pattern by naming the year, month, day of the month, and occasionally day of the week.[114] Recording the battle and subsequent peace treaty made between Constans and the Arabs, Sebeos begins, "In the second year of Constans, in the month Hori on the 23rd day of the month, on a Sunday at dawn. . . ."[115] Besides constituting good notarial practice, this system of dating enhanced the authenticity of the text, discouraging any who sought to question its truth.[116]

The use of epithets at Mren likewise creates the impression of an official and formal document. Significantly, diplomatic and clerical letters included in the chronicle are dense with descriptive designations: a letter from the archpriest Modestos to the patriarch of Armenia greets the "most good, blessed, and spiritual, archbishop and metropolitan of the land of Armenia."[117] It has recently been pointed out that the "victorious" Heraclius mentioned at Mren finds parallels in Sebeos's description of the emperor as "blessed," "pious," and "late-lamented."[118] He is elsewhere named the "God-loving, God-worshipping, God-given, the valiant and victorious, beneficent, fortunate Heraclius."[119] These epithets derive directly from the regnal formulas of Heraclius employed on legal and official documents, preserved primarily in papyri from post-630 Byzantine Egypt.[120] As at Mren, they use the reign year of Heraclius to calculate the date and precisely the same terms (in Greek): "protected by God," "most pious," and "God-crowned."[121] Similar language is used in the lengthy protocols found in headings to contemporary imperial legislation and correspondence, which list all titles claimed by the emperor.[122]

Within the context of contemporary Armenian epigraphy, the formal, official tone of the Mren inscription is noticeably heightened. Other inscriptions certainly use the regnal formulas of Heraclius, confirming the success of the emperor in extending Byzantine power into the Caucasus in the 630s.[123] The church of Alaman, for example, bears a similar synchronistic device, relating the completion of building in the "27th year of Heraclius pious king, in the time of Nersēh lord of Shirak and Arsharunik and T'eop'ighos bishop of Aršarunik."[124] It should be noted, though, that the synchronism carries only three elements and continues in a much more intimate tone: "I Grigor Eghustr and Marias my wife built this holy church for the sake of our souls." The Kamsarakan foundation of Nakhtchevan/Noramunk conveys a poetic style, recording the deaths of the patrons as "an end ordained by God and a departure that was called by Christ."[125]

The generic dedication of Mren to the "Kamsarakans" distinguishes it from other examples in the corpus. This impersonal usage, together with the expansive nature of the dedication, may be taken as further evidence that Mren operated as a dynastic foundation and, at the same time, performed a more public function within the political affairs of Armenia and Byzantium at this time. The inscription therefore represents a "public text": a device that, it has been previously assumed, was virtually absent from the reign of Justinian to the rise of the Fatimids in the eastern Mediterranean.[126]

That the text may have been inaccessible to some of its audience need not have mitigated its effects. Such inscriptions held authority by virtue of their sheer material presence: Who could doubt such large, confident letters, engraved in a rectangular field above the west facade of a monument? One is reminded of Sebeos's tale of the treacherous patriarch Nersēs, in which assembled bishops request the search for a document that would reveal his duplicity to Emperor Constans. The subsequent passage contains no mention of reading or translating of the text; we are simply told that Constans "realized [Nersēs'] deceit."[127] Perhaps the tangible presence of the document, like the text inscription, was persuasion enough: Constans, like most readers of modern legal documents, may have simply listened to his lawyer, nodded his head, and signed.

The legitimacy of the material finds a visual corollary in the

minute rendering of the garments worn by Dawit' and Nersēs on the west portal below the inscription. The high level of detail may reflect more than simply admiration for complex textures, for the emphasis placed on traditional noble dress reiterates the fulsome titles of the inscription in marking status. One wonders whether the property of density, both in the written and visual documents, did not also impart an impression of authenticity. It is nevertheless worth remembering that such impressions exist independently of textual content, much like fur coats that can be worn or removed.

A Nexus of Negotiation

As a stone repository of texts and images, accessible to multiple audiences, the church of Mren can be situated within a much broader tradition of building, writing, and sculpting in the Middle Ages. In her recent study of the portal of St-Lazare, Autun, Linda Seidel has suggested that the inscribed name of Gislibertus denotes not an itinerant sculptor, as commonly believed, but an eponymous duke who donated relics to the church, thus conveying an important message of local power and legitimacy in twelfth-century Burgundy.[128] Rendered in visible and material terms, she argues, this message was critical in the midst of territorial battles between the clergy and the local duchies. In both Romanesque France and seventh-century Armenia, the building facade responded to an unstable climate by "publishing" and storing data in a masonry archive that was perpetually available and difficult to alter.

Much more may be said of the significance of Mren within medieval visual culture. The inscriptions and portals imply levels of interaction between viewing and reading, implicating audience reception, performance, literacy, and orality.[129] In this sense, they are best understood within the context of exterior epigraphy and imagery in the Middle Ages. Amid the vast primary and secondary literature on the subject, one may note several ways in which the issues raised at Mren engage with current scholarly discourse.[130] At face value, the west facade inscription, like much monumental writing, operates within the political arena: serving to record the foundation of the site and to glorify those involved.[131] In general terms, its relation to the adjacent west portal is similarly conventional. In concert with images, medieval epigraphy functioned on a number of levels in relation to images. Besides more straightforward glosses or explanations, texts provided exegetical and allegorical commentary on the visual material. A portal from the cathedral of Ferrara, for example, adjoins to a scene of Christ trampling beasts the written message: "This image which you see is neither God nor man, but it is rather a man and a God which the image signifies."[132] Juxtaposition of the two media could generate a range of additional responses, such as irony and humor, as a recent analysis of the portal at Conques has indicated.[133]

In this light, the marriage of text and relief at Mren presents an unusually complex scenario. The inscribed lines on the west facade furnish many names but never quite articulate the identity of the sponsors. The giant synchronism seems instead engaged in a semiotic dance with the imagery of the portal below. Parallel or even relational meaning is ducked and subverted.[134] The text evokes the emperor while the portal features Christ. The local figures act like donors, but the precise configuration of the commission remains unsaid. Similar riddles haunt the north portal. Do we see Heraclius or Dawit'? Is this the representation of Byzantine triumph or patrons and clerics performing a uniquely Armenian commemorative rite? Viewing the portals at Mren, these questions flare as rapidly as alliances were formed and broken on the eastern frontier. Understood in positive terms, they provide enough slippage to accommodate the possibility of changing circumstances and audiences.

Such *heteroglossia* allies Mren to medieval traditions elsewhere. The epigraphic program of the al-Aqmar mosque, sponsored by Wazīr al-Maʾmūn in 1122, features a similarly "ambiguous juxtaposition aimed at unclearly defined audiences."[135] It has recently been proposed that the combination of messages on the facade was selected to respond to the intricately woven social context in which the monument was embedded, which included an audience of multiethnic, multireligious pedestrian traffic.[136] Questions of viewing and textual comprehension also inform studies of pilgrimage road sculpture. A recent study of the south portal at Santiago de Compostela has explored how the iconography, which highlights ecclesiastical authority, the suffering and betrayal of Christ, and the evils of sin, served the goals of its patron, Bishop Diego Gelmirez (r. 1100–1140).[137] Yet visual experience of the portal would have varied within the community, hinging on issues of literacy and social class: in addition to the interpretation intended by Gelmirez, one may posit a series of "misreadings" and "nonreadings" of the sculpture and thus locate polyvalence within a climate of political and social oppression.[138] In Armenia, as in Spain and Egypt, the relation between public message and audience was dynamic, changing, and dependent on the specific circumstances of reception. I would argue further that the portals at Mren, generated within a militarized "hot zone" and viewed by an often-violent spectatorship, present us with a particularly intense example of this phenomenon, five centuries earlier than their comparanda.

Differentiation of viewing at Mren was heightened by the variables of linguistic and alphabetic knowledge. That the text is written in the Armenian alphabet, and therefore not comprehensible to most literate Greeks, invites us to wonder what the inscription would have meant to a Greek speaker. Irene Bierman has recently argued that the public writing signs served a territorial function: to those who could not read, the signs were exclusionary, "telling them what they are not, alienating them from information, and preventing them from participating in the social networks that writing signifies."[139] For those who could read, according to the scholar, the signs established group identity. The Armenian case, which combines text with imagery, complicates this hypothesis. Measuring literacy in seventh-century Armenia is extremely difficult, but the evidence suggests that only a small fraction of the population could read, a group formed mostly of clergy. It is likely that for the broad majority of Armenians, including aristocracy, textual meanings would have been accessed through oral commentary and liturgical performance, as in the commemorative rite described earlier.[140] For both sets of viewers, certainly, the use of the alphabet would have endowed the building and surrounding space with a sense of group territory, much like the building signs in the Armenian

neighborhoods of Watertown, Massachusetts, or Glendale, California.

At the same time, I doubt that a Byzantine viewer would feel completely estranged by the exotic alphabet. The recognizable presences of Christ, Peter and Paul, and particularly the courtly archangels would have gone far to assuage feelings of exclusion. Standing before a familiar Christian scene in the portal, in fact, the Greek-speaking spectator might well have imposed a meaning on the text above—a meaning informed by visual identification, narration, expectation, and desire. In this way, the script, combined with the images, could be received with a kind of "contextual visual literacy,"[141] a scenario that complicates present notions of viewing and writing in the Middle Ages.

The political and social functions of the facades, finally, allow a reconsideration of the problem of architectural form and, more broadly, invite an alternative interpretation of the emergence of the centralized plan in the Christian East. When viewed through the traditional lens of typology, the building offers few surprises: its cross-domed form can be grouped within a category of plans in seventh-century Armenia, generally referred to as post-Justinianic building in the Christian East.[142] Such terminology is unfortunate, summoning the image of a bland little group of churches nestled in the shadows of an imperial tradition. The case of Mren, however, presents another perspective. When considered within its specific political and economic circumstances, the monument would appear to have carried meanings that were far from generic. The lofty height of the building in comparison to its breadth creates an emphatic vertical punctuating the flat stretches of surrounding plain. The elevated cross arms, intersecting at the tall drum and dome, also underscore the centeredness of the architecture. This focus on intersection and centrality are particularly apt visual metaphors for a building that represents the interaction of imperial, princely, and local spheres. Such themes, moreover, may be detected in the structure of the inscription. Opening with the date of the reign of Heraclius, the text starts expansively and then proceeds to increasingly smaller spheres of authority, from the prince, to bishop, to the local lord. In the closing of the inscription, the circles grow larger again, as the text pleads intercession for the Kamsarakan family, the town of Mren, and "all the land." Both verbally and structurally, then, Mren seems planted at the center of the world: a nexus of negotiation.

Such an assertion might easily be read as provincial bluster. Tucked in a stony corner of Asia Minor, invisible from the Mediterranean shoreline, few regions might look farther from the center. Yet in this case, the lens of modern scholarship has defined parameters that are distortingly narrow. Located at the crux of confrontations between the two ancient superpowers and eyewitness to the emerging tide of Islam, Armenia, in the seventh century, was indeed at the center of the world. In view of their date, moreover, the Armenian monuments deserve our equal attention, for they demonstrate how the verbal and visual could be deployed with brilliance during one of the most chaotic and devastating of centuries, shedding precious light on an otherwise obscure chapter in the history of the Middle Ages.

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Notes

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Latin transcription of the Armenian alphabet follows the Library of Congress system.

1. For eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Orientalist theories on Armenian art and architecture, see the travel account of Frédéric Dubois de Montpéreux, *Voyage autour du Caucase chez les Tcherkesses et les Abkhases, en Colchide, en Géorgie, en Arménie, et en Crimée; Avec un atlas géographique pittoresque, archéologique, géologique, etc.* (Paris: Librairie de Gide, 1839–43). The Aryan position is taken by Josef Strzygowski, most notably in his *Die Baukunst der Armenier und Europa*, 2 vols. (Vienna: Anton Schroll, 1918). See a critical analysis of both works in Christina Maranci, *Medieval Armenian Architecture: Constructions of Race and Nation* (Louvain: Peeters, 2001).
2. Among major medieval surveys, for example, James Snyder's *Medieval Art* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1989) and Marilyn Stokstad's *Medieval Art* (Philadelphia: Westview Press, 2004) contain discussion of Byzantium but not of Armenia.
3. In general art historical studies, discussions of this problem have been under way since at least the 1990s. See, for example, Lucy Lippard, *Mixed Blessings: New Art in a Multicultural America* (New York: New Press, 1990), 3–17; and Oleg Grabar, "On the Universality of the History of Art," *Art Journal* 42 (1982): 281–83.
4. The inscribed exterior surfaces of Armenian churches are typically overlooked by scholars of medieval inscriptions and architecture. Irene Bierman has recently argued for the rarity of exterior texts in the eastern Mediterranean from the sixth to tenth century, neglecting to mention the significant corpus of seventh-century Transcaucasian material. Bierman, *Writing Signs: The Fatimid Public Text* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 34. The Armenian inscriptions present an important counterexample to this thesis, and the decentralized political structure of seventh-century Armenia, controlled by a group of individual princely families and engaged in continuous side-switching between the Byzantine and Persian Empires, complicates Bierman's categorization of either "ruling" or "nonruling" groups involved in the production of public texts.
5. Linda Seidel, *Legends in Limestone: Lazarus, Gizlibertus, and the Cathedral of Autun* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 64.
6. Most of the surviving seventh-century architecture of the Merovingians has been incorporated into later structures. See Robert Calkins, *Medieval Architecture in Western Europe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), figs. 5.9, 5.10. The Visigothic churches of Spain, by contrast, offer a more robust corpus for seventh-century architecture in Europe. See Jerrilynn Dodds, *Architecture and Ideology in Early Medieval Spain* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990).
7. Cyril Mango, *Byzantine Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985), 89.
8. See also Robert Ousterhout, "The Architecture of Iconoclasm," in *Byzantium in the Iconoclast Era (ca 680–850): The Sources,* ed. Leslie Brubaker and John Haldon (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 2001), 3–36. It is significant that of the twenty-six buildings cataloged by Ousterhout, none is conclusively dated to the seventh century, and only three have been tentatively assigned to that era.
9. As Nina G. Garsoïan has observed, neither Byzantium nor Sasanian Persia sought direct control over the Transcaucasus but instead assigned its governance to local powers. See Garsoïan, "Frontier/Frontiers? Transcaucasia and Eastern Anatolia in the Pre-Islamic Period," in *La Persia e Bisanzio* (Rome: Accademia dei Lincei, 2004), 338–39.
10. T'oros T'oramanyan, *Materials for the Study of Armenian Architecture* [in Armenian] (Erevan: Academy of Sciences, 1942–48), vol. 1, 295–96,

vol. 2, 187–90; Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier.* Appropriating the methodology and themes of Indo-European scholarship, Strzygowski argued for the Aryan essence of Armenian domed forms and traced its dissemination in monuments from Byzantium to Renaissance Florence. He aimed not only to promote what he perceived as Aryan culture but also to challenge the primacy of classical building ideas in the history of architecture.

11. See, for example, Francesco Gandolfo, *Le basiliche armene: Studi di architectura medioevale armena,* vol. 5 (Rome: De Luca, 1982); Jean-Michel Thierry, *Répertoire des monastères arméniens* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993); and idem, "Les tetraconques à niches d'angle," *Bazmavep* 158 (1980): 124–80.

12. Modern political conflicts, benign or hostile neglect, and unskilled restoration efforts have led to the deterioration of the buildings. Seismic activity, so characteristic of the region, has also caused damage.

13. For exceptions to this rule, see Thomas Mathews, "Observations on St. Hripsime," *Art and Architecture in Byzantium and Armenia* (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 1995), 205 → Lynn Jones, "The Church of the Holy Cross and the Iconography of Kingship," *Gesta* 33 (1994): 104–17; → Christina Maranci, "Byzantium through Armenian Eyes: Cultural Appropriation and the Church of Zuart'noc'," *Gesta* 40, no. 2 (2001): 105–24; and idem, "The Architect Trdat: Building Practices and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Byzantium and Armenia," *Journal for the Society of Architectural Historians* 62, no. 3 (September 2003): 294–305.

14. On the historiography of the imperial model and an effort to revise it, see Ann Wharton Epstein, *Art of Empire: Painting and Architecture of the Byzantine Periphery* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988).

15. The church is first mentioned in the ninth century by Yovhannēs Draskhanakerts'i in *History of the Armenians,* trans. Krikor Maksoudian (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987). The twelfth-century chronicle of Samuel Anets'i (Samuel of Ani) also mentions the site. See Marie-Félicité Brosset, *Collections d'historiens arméniens* (St. Petersburg: Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1876), vol. 2, 417. Kirakos Gandzakets'i (1200–1271) records the construction of the church in his *History of the Armenians.* For a French translation, see Marie-Félicité Brosset, "Histoire de l'Arménie par le vartabed Kiracos de Gantzac," in *Deux historiens arméniens* (St. Petersburg: Imperial Academy of Sciences, 1870), vol. 1, 27. None of these sources, however, specifies the dedication of the church, which remains unknown. Major modern studies of the church include T'oramanyan, *Materials for the Study of Armenian Architecture;* Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier,* vol. 1, 182–84; Step'an Mnatsak'anyan, "When Was the Church of Mren Constructed?" [in Armenian], *Journal of History and Philology* 46, no. 3 (1969): 149–64; and Jean-Michel Thierry and Nicole Thierry, "Notes sur des monuments arméniens en Turquie," *Revue des Études Arméniennes* 2 (1965): 161–73. The most recent and comprehensive study of the church is by Jean-Michel Thierry and Nicole Thierry, "La cathédrale de Mren et sa décoration," *Cahiers Archéologiques* 21 (1971): 43–77.

16. Traditionally regarded as objects of veneration, these rectangular slabs may have also performed apotropaic and devotional functions.

17. The monument may have already suffered damage during Arab and Seljuk raids in the early Middle Ages. Its later fate is known only through sporadic sources. An inscription on the church attests to its restoration during the Georgian domination of Armenia in the thirteenth century. The addition of a structure to the west of the church probably dates to the fourteenth century or later. See Thierry and Thierry, "La cathédrale de Mren," 44.

18. To quote Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier,* 182: "Height, above all, is the effect."

19. For a detailed discussion of the portals, windows, and the architectural sculpture that adorns them, see Thierry and Thierry, "La cathédrale de Mren," 53–76.

20. Richard Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture,* revised with S. Ćurčić (London: Penguin Books, 1986), 327, 340.

21. Below the apse is a small chamber that may have functioned as a crypt.

22. The Thierrys also note a series of busts of prophets painted on the south face of the apse and one figure of a bishop on the north wall of the eastern arm. These fragments appear only in outline as of this writing. For a description of the program, see Thierry and Thierry, "La cathédral de Mren," 76–77.

23. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture,* 134–56.

24. I borrow this geologic analogy from Helen C. Evans, "The Armenians," in *The Glory of Byzantium: Art and Culture of the Middle Byzantine Era, A.D. 843–1261,* ed. Evans and William D. Wixom (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), 251–52.

25. Thierry and Thierry, "La cathédrale de Mren," 52–53.

26. Ibid., 63, 72; Nicole Thierry, "Héraclius et la vraie croix en Arménie," in *From Byzantium to Iran: Armenian Studies in Honour of Nina G. Garsoian,* ed. Jean-Pierre Mahé and Robert W. Thomson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 165; and Minas S. Sargsyan, "The Bas-Reliefs of the Founders of the Church of Mren" [in Armenian], *Patma-Banasirakan Handēs* 4 (1966): 244–45, 247, 248.

27. These in fact appear more like flattened disks rather than orbs.

28. Between the heads of the two angels is a carved projection now too damaged to read. Early Byzantine iconographic formulas, however, suggest that it may have represented the hand of God; in the sixth-century Sinai icon of the Virgin, Child, and saints, the divine hand appears between the archangels in the upper portion of the panel. If correct, this identification is significant. The presence of God at the center of the composition, above the figure of Christ in the lintel, generates a vertical axis of authority, complementing (and complicating) the horizontal axis implied by the flanking figures of saints, bishop, and donors.

29. See F. I. Smit, "Panagia Angeloktistos," *Izvestija Russkogo Arheologisceskogo Instituta v Konstaninopole* 15 (1911): 206–39; and Arthur H. S. Megaw, "Byzantine Architecture and Decoration in Cyprus," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 28 (1974): 74–76.

30. On the relation between the angelic and the imperial in Middle Byzantine art, see Henry Maguire, "The Heavenly Court," in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks/Harvard University Press, 1997), 247–58. On the representation of angels in particular, see Glen Peers, "Patriarchal Politics in the Paris Gregory (N.N. gr. 510)," *Jahrbuch für Österreichisches Byzantinistik* 47 (1997): 53–57; and more recently, idem, *Subtle Bodies: Representing Angels in Byzantium* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2001). On the costume of archangels, see Catherine Jolivet-Levy, "Note sur la représentation des archanges en costume impérial dans l'iconographie Byzantine," *Cahiers Archéologiques* 46 (1998): 121–28.

31. Maranci, "Byzantium through Armenian Eyes."

32. As in the poem by George of Pisidia: "For the emperor Heraclius and his war in Persia upon leaving the capital." For an Italian translation, see *Giorgio di Pisidia: Poemi,* vol. 1, *Panegirici epici, edizione critica: Traduzione e commento,* ed. Agostino Pertusi (Ettal, Germany: Buch-Kunstverlag, 1959), 84.

33. See Thierry and Thierry, "La cathédrale de Mren," 64, figs. 21, 22. The unusually long sleeves also appear at Ateni (65, fig. 23), although there the figure appears to have his arms inserted. This custom, to judge from the fur-coated barbarians at the base of the column of Theodosius in Constantinople, is a long-standing tradition. There, as at Mren, the figures do not have their arms inserted through the sleeves.

34. Ibid., 65–66.

35. Ibid., 69: "Although sufficiently representative of the Armenian world in its stylized character and display of local costume, the [portal of] the cathedral of Mren nevertheless belongs, in a general sense, to the Christian art of the Middle Ages, as much to Byzantium as to Rome."

36. Examples of this method of inquiry include Barbara Zeitler, *Perceptions of the Levant: Studies in the Arts of the Latin East* (PhD diss., University of London, 1992); and idem, "Cross-Cultural Interpretations of Imagery in the Middle Ages," *Art Bulletin* 76 (1994): 680–95. See → Lucy-Anne Hunt, "Art and Colonialism: The Mosaics of the Church of the Nativity of Bethlehem (1169) and the Problem of 'Crusader' Art," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 45 (1991): 69–86. For a variety of approaches, see Marilyn J. Chiat and Kathyrn L. Reyerson, eds., *The Medieval Mediterranean: Cross-Cultural Contacts* (St. Cloud, Minn.: North Star Press, 1988).

37. Although such equines obviously possess a long history in the visual arts, it is notable that the horse is executing the *piaffe,* a gait of classical dressage that is physically possible only for select horses, extremely difficult to induce, and generally achievable only with a rider or someone schooling it from the ground. That the horse on the north portal maintains this attitude independently seems to further highlight the authority of the dismounted rider.

38. See N. Thierry, "Héraclius et la vraie croix"; and Sargsyan, "The Bas-Reliefs."

39. Michael Gough, *Alahan: An Early Christian Monastery in Southern Turkey: Based on the Work of Michael Gough,* ed. Mary Gough (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1985).

40. For a recent study and bibliography, see László Török, ed., *After the Pharaohs: Treasures of Coptic Art from Egyptian Collections,* exh. cat., Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2005.

41. A survey of monumental sculpture in early medieval Armenia appears in Patrick Donabédian and Jean-Michel Thierry, *Les arts arméniens* (Paris: Éditions Mazenod, 1987); and Patrick Donabédian, "Apports byzantins dans la sculpture arménienne préarabe," in *L'Arménie et By-*

zance: Histoire et culture (Paris: Centres de Recherches d'Histoire et de Civilisation Byzantines, 1996), 89–98. Late-sixth- and seventh-century churches in Georgia also bear passages of relief sculpture, such as the churches of Jvari, Ateni, and Tsromi. See Antony Eastmond, *Royal Imagery in Medieval Georgia* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 9–39; and Wachtang Djobadze, "The Sculptures on the Eastern Façade of the Holy Cross of Mtzkheta," pts. 1 and 2, *Oriens Christianus* 44 (1960): 112–35, 45 (1961): 70–77.

42. It is worth nothing that scholars of Romanesque sculpture often overlook the seventh-century corpus of Armenian sculpture. Calvin Kendall writes that the tympanum was "invented more than once in the last two decades of the 11th century." Kendall, *The Allegory of the Church: Romanesque Portals and Their Verse Inscriptions* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 55.

43. See, for example, Charles F. M. Texier, *Description de l'Arménie, de la Perse, de la Mésopotamie* (Paris: F. Didot Frères, 1842–52), vol. 1, 112.

44. Karl Schnaase, *Geschichte der Bildenden Künste* (Düsseldorf: J. Buddeus, 1844), vol. 2, 271, no. 1.

45. For his references to Armenian and "*Romanische*" *Kunst,* see Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier,* 547, 744ff., 796, 797ff.

46. Strzygowski's new northerly interests replaced his conviction in the creative primacy of the Orient. This transition seems to have coincided, tellingly, with the end of World War I.

47. Christina Maranci, "Art History and the True North: Race and Geography in the Work of Josef Strzygowski" (paper presented at the Thirtieth International Congress of the History of Art, London, September 3–8, 2000).

48. Kurt Weitzmann, *Sailing with Byzantium from Europe to America: Memoirs of an Art Historian* (Munich: Editio Maris, 1994), 39–40.

49. Maranci, *Medieval Armenian Architecture,* and idem, "Basilicas and Black Holes: Armenian Architecture in the Work of Josef Strzygowski," in *Evolution vs. Migration: Universal and/or Particular Values in Art History,* ed. Klaniczay Gabor (Budapest: Institute for Advanced Study, forthcoming).

50. I suspect both the Romanesque and Armenian portals share another common feature: memories of the classical world. Mren's sculpted arch, topped by a rectangular block of writing, brings to mind the tradition of triumphal arches and city gates. The "victorious Heraclius" named in the inscription renders these sources particularly compelling. Understanding how and why this tradition was appropriated and what it signified to a seventh-century viewer requires the exploration of pre-Christian Armenia, which was informed by both Iranian and classical cultures. See James R. Russell, *Zoroastrianism in Armenia,* Harvard Iranian Studies, vol. 5 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures and the National Association of Armenian Studies and Research, 1987); and Nina G. Garsoïan, *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985). For recent studies of Romanesque and the antique, see Seidel, *Legends in Limestone,* 79–110; and Kendall, *Allegory of the Church,* 21–32.

51. English translation from Timothy Greenwood, "A Corpus of Early Armenian Inscriptions," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004): 83. Greenwood's essay departs from the standard paleographic studies of the field as it considers what the inscriptions reveal about social organization and political alliances and how they reflect contemporary literary sources. For a comprehensive study of Armenian scripts, see Michael E. Stone, Dickran Kouymjian, and Henning Lehmann, eds., *Album of Armenian Paleography* (Århus, Denmark: Århus University Press, 2002).

52. For further discussion of changes in Heraclius's appellation after 630, see Walter Kaegi, *Heraclius: Emperor of Byzantium* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 194.

53. For discussions, illustrations, and bibliography of this church, see Donabédian and J.-M. Thierry, *Les arts arméniens,* 580.

54. As noted by Robert Thomson in *The Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos,* trans. Thomson with James Howard-Johnston and Timothy Greenwood (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), 230. Dawit''s involvement with Mren is also supported by a textual tradition beginning in the ninth century, in which he is designated as its founder. See Thierry and Thierry, "La cathédrale de Mren," 45.

55. Iosef Orbeli, the first to undertake an epigraphic study at Mren, believed it was Dawit', noting that Armenian sources beginning in the ninth century attribute the construction of the church to him. I. A. Orbeli, "The Inscription of 639 at Bagavan and Other Armenian Inscriptions of the 7th Century" [in Russian], in *Selected Works* (Erevan: Academy of Sciences, 1963), 395–401. Thierry and Thierry, "La cathédrale de Mren," object, claiming that Dawit''s short tenure of three years as prince could not have sustained the construction of the building. Moreover, they interpret the inscription's lack of specificity regarding the founder as an intentional vagueness, adopted to accommodate the existence of two successive donors. They argue that the building was founded by Ēzr, patriarch of Armenia in the early seventh century, and subsequently completed by Dawit' "as a prestigious foundation that contributed to [his] glory." No documentary evidence survives to suggest, however, that Ēzr was involved with the church of Mren. With regard to patronage, Greenwood, "A Corpus," considers the possibility that the founder was Nersēs Kamsarakan, reminding us that the text clearly states the purpose of the church: to intercede for the family of the Kamsarakans and Mren. Yet if Nersēs was the sole founder, why is he depicted on the portal with another noble in a nearly identical pose and costume?

56. June of the same year saw the assassination of the Persian king Shahrvaraz, followed by a succession crisis to the throne, placing the Byzantines at a significant tactical advantage. Kaegi, *Heraclius,* 206–8. For further discussion regarding the date of the recovery, the history of the relic, and its reception in Byzantium and the West, see Hölger Klein, *Byzanz, der Westen, und das "wahre" Kreuz: Die Geschichte einer Reliquie und ihrer kunstlerische Fassung im Byzanz und im Abendland* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2004).

57. See Kaegi, *Heraclius,* 260–61.

58. The Greek title *curopalate* is rendered in Armenian as *kiwrpalat,* a high court title granted to only one individual, who might perform a variety of functions. The Armenian *sparapet* denotes the rank of general or commander. For further discussion of this and other Armenian titles, see *The Epic Histories (Buzandaran Patmut'iwnk')*, trans. Nina G. Garsoïan (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 560–61.

59. Another proposal makes Dawit''s ascent look much less dramatic. N. Thierry, "Héraclius et la vraie croix," has suggested that Dawit' Sahaṙuni was involved much more closely with the affairs of Heraclius, and that he was an agent in the restitution of the True Cross to Jerusalem. However, the contemporary chronicle of Sebeos, *The Armenian History,* mentions no such involvement, and the testimony of later Armenian sources regarding Sahaṙuni present what seem to be irreconcilable chronologies. For discussion and bibliography, see Kaegi, *Heraclius,* 190.

60. *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos,* 94.

61. *Nakharar* social structure, as Nina G. Garsoïan observed, was essentially aristocratic, feudal, and rural. Intense loyalty to this centripetal structure, moreover, seems to have discouraged any attempts toward the foundation of urban settlements in Armenia during late antiquity. See Garsoïan, "The Early-Mediaeval Armenian City: An Alien Element?" in *Church and Culture in Early Mediaeval Armenia* (Ashgate, U.K.: Variorum, 1999), vol. 7, 67–83.

62. Garsoïan, "Frontier/Frontiers?" 336. Discussion of the social and political organization and probable Iranian origins of the *nakharar* system appears in C. Toumanoff, *Studies in Christian Caucasian History* (Georgetown, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1963); and Nina G. Garsoïan, "Prolegomena to a Study of the Iranian Elements in Arsacid Armenia," in *Armenia between Byzantium and the Sasanians* (London: Variorum Reprints, 1985), vol. 10, 19–27.

63. *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos,* 49–50.

64. Ibid., 94.

65. Michael Psellus, *Fourteen Byzantine Rulers: The Chronografia of Michael Psellus,* trans. E. R. A. Sewter (London: Penguin Books, 1966), 72 n. 1.

66. Matthew of Edessa, *Armenia and the Crusades, Tenth to Twelfth Centuries: The Chronicle of Matthew of Edessa,* trans. A. E. Dostourian (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1993), 47. I thank Tony Cutler for bringing these imperial gifts to my attention.

67. Kaegi, *Heraclius,* 206–7. See also James Trilling, "The Soul of Empire: Style and Meaning in the Mosaic Pavement of the Byzantine Imperial Palace in Constantinople," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 43 (1989): 26–72. I am grateful to Robert Ousterhout for this citation.

68. *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos,* 92. If the hypothesis of Mren as imperial gift is correct, it may explain the brilliant coloration of the cathedral. The pinks and grays of the facing slabs, which intensify during the midday sun, play a decisive role in the viewer's experience. This masonry pattern differs strikingly from contemporary brick-and-stone masonry of Byzantine architecture; it is also more colorful than many other early medieval Armenian churches. A deep appreciation for rich hues is found in contemporary Armenian sources, most particularly in the description of gifts.

69. The tenth-century church of Gagik in Ani, in many ways a more complicated structure, was built in five years.

70. James Howard-Johnston emphasizes that Heraclius was intent on reimposing Byzantine authority in the provinces once held by Persia, and that he did so partly as a religious scheme to unify Christendom and to convert the Jews as well. Toward this effort, the emperor held a council to impose ecclesiastical union on Armenia in 631 in the town of Theodosiopolis (modern Erzerum in eastern Turkey). Ēzr, then

catholicos, agreed to the union, but it was by no means a unanimous position and was subsequently overturned (although his immediate successor, Nersēs, also held Chalcedonian inclinations). See *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos,* 228.

71. See Kaegi, *Heraclius,* 213–20.

72. More problematic than identifying the nobles is distinguishing between them. Although previous studies of the monument identify Nersēs at left and Dawit' at right, no detailed justification has been provided. N. Thierry, "Héraclius et la vraie croix," 165, no. 4, connects the wide face and bare head of the left-hand figure with the more youthful Nersēs, who by the late 630s would have reached only eighteen to twenty-one years of age. The narrower face and bonnet-like hat of the right-hand figure may indicate the greater age and experience of Dawit', who by 636 had already conspired in an imperial plot and held more powerful political status than Nersēs at the time of Mren's foundation. If we accept this identification, the more expansive gesture of the right-hand figure may suggest a greater role played by Dawit' in commissioning the church.

73. As has been observed regarding medieval charters of the Latin West, it may be that the inscription and portal sculpture at Mren stood as the tangible record of an event or transaction between Heraclius, Dawit', and Nersēs. See Constance Bouchard, *Holy Entrepreneurs: Cistercians, Knights, and Economic Exchange in Twelfth-Century Burgundy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991).

74. Garsoïan, *Epic Histories,* 146. On royal clothing and exchange, see Anthony Cutler, "Exchanges of Clothing in Byzantium and Islam: Asymmetrical Sources, Symmetrical Practices," in *Pré-actes: XXe Congrès International des Études Byzantines* (Paris: Comité d'Organisation du XXe Congrès International des Études Byzantines, Collège de France, 2001), 91–95.

75. See, for example, Nina G. Garsoïan, *L'église arménienne et le grand schisme d'Orient,* Corpus scriptorum christianorum orientalium (Louvain: Peeters, 1999).

76. For these texts and additional historical evidence for episcopal reigns used in synchronisms, see Greenwood, "A Corpus," 46.

77. See Tilmann Buddensieg, "Le coffret en ivoire de Pola, Saint-Pierre et le Latran," *Cahiers Archéologiques* 10 (1959): 163–68; Walter N. Schumacher, "Dominus legem dat," *Romische Quartalschrift* 54 (1959): 1–39; and Caecilia Davis-Weyer, "Das Traditio-Legis Bild und seine Nachfolge," *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst,* 3rd ser., 12 (1961): 7–45. For a useful summary of the image type, see Annemarie Weyl Carr, "Traditio Legis," in *Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 2102.

78. Carr, "Traditio Legis."

79. See Thierry and Thierry, "La cathédrale de Mren," 67; and Sirarpie Der Nersessian, *L'art arménien* (Paris: Flammarion, Arts et Métiers Graphiques, 1977), 57. A related image appears in the apse in the church of Aruch in Armenia (ca. 660), where a fragmentary wall painting features Christ standing above and between the Apostles, a formula known primarily from apsidal images at Sts. Cosmas and Damian and St. Andrea Catabarbara (see Der Nersessian, fig. 47). Unlike in the Western examples, however, Christ's scroll at Aruch is open, revealing a quotation from John 14:21. I argue in a forthcoming study that the virtues and rewards of loyalty, highlighted in both the selection of images and text at Mren and Aruch, held particular sociopolitical resonance in seventh-century Armenia. See Christina Maranci, *The Geometry of Power: Building, Writing, and Sculpting in Early Medieval Armenia,* forthcoming.

80. Der Nersessian, "L'art arménien," 58.

81. The idea of display may be explored within additional contexts. It is significant that early images of the *traditio legis* are found not only in apses and on sarcophagi but also on decorated caskets. The cover of the fourth-century Pola Casket preserves the image of Christ standing between Paul and Peter. Although the precise function of the ivory is not known, Buddensieg, "Le coffret en ivoire de Pola," 188, considered it a "souvenir of pilgrimage." By the tenth century, Byzantine and Islamic texts record small caskets of precious materials among diplomatic gift envoys, such as those of Romanos Lecapenos to al-Radi. *Book of Gifts and Rarities, Kitāb al-Hadāyā wa al-Tuhaf,* ed. and trans. G. al-Hijjāwī al-Qaddūmī (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997), 63, sec. 5, 99–100, sec. 73. It is thus tempting to imagine portable boxes among the "gold and silver vessels" mentioned as imperial gifts in the account of Sebeos (*Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos,* 55). Later Armenian legends, moreover, recount that Heraclius offered a piece of the True Cross to Armenian nobles in thanks for help in its recovery. Lynn Jones, "Medieval Armenian Identity and Relics of the True Cross (9th–11th Centuries)," *Journal of the Society for Armenian Studies* 12 (2001–2): 43–53. Did Heraclius present a reliquary box containing this relic to the church of Mren? The possibility is tantalizing, considering the early medieval reliquaries of the True Cross that feature the *traditio legis.* Further study of this question may yield new perspectives on gifts, relics, and display in seventh-century Byzantium and Armenia.

82. Michael T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), 232.

83. Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987).

84. Walter Kaegi, *Byzantine Military Unrest* (Amsterdam: A. M. Hakkert, 1981), esp. 137; and idem, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

85. *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos,* 94.

86. The pairing of the emperor and Christ raises the role of imperial imagery in Early Christian art, a subject that has recently generated lively debate. See, for example, Thomas F. Mathews, *The Clash of Gods: A Reinterpretation of Early Christian Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999). Discussion has hitherto focused on visual production in Rome and Byzantium, but an exploration of the topic in Armenian art may offer fresh insights, not only because of its distinctive visual character but also, and more important, because it was produced outside the direct influence of the imperial paradigm.

87. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination,* ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); and Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd, eds., *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1989). For the application of Bakhtin's *heteroglossia* to visual culture, see Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 174–298.

88. *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos,* 90.

89. Based on her identification, Nicole Thierry, "Héraclius et la vraie croix," 176, has suggested that Heraclius commissioned the church of Mren to celebrate his famous deed, although this theory too remains unproven. Nevertheless, it is highly doubtful that Heraclius was alone in his involvement with the cathedral. See *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos,* 230. For a discussion of the centrality of relics of the True Cross to later medieval Armenian culture, see Jones, "Medieval Armenian Identity."

90. N. Thierry, "Héraclius et la vraie croix," 167.

91. For the most recent study to accept this theory, see Greenwood, "A Corpus," 27–91.

92. N. Thierry, "Héraclius et la vraie croix," 167, interprets the costume as a long, fitted tunic over trousers and boots. That such clothing reflects Transcaucasian rather than Byzantine traditions does not trouble the scholar, who suggests that its rugged quality was appropriate for "military exercises in those mountainous regions."

93. See Donabédian and J.-M. Thierry, *Les arts arméniens,* 365, fig. 199.

94. Consider, for example, Smbat Bagratuni: "Such was his power that when he passed through dense forests under strong trees on his big-limbed and powerful horse, grasping the branch of a tree he would hold firmly, and forcefully tightening his thighs and legs around the horse's middle, he would raise it with his legs from the ground, so that when all the soldiers saw this they were awestruck and astonished." *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos,* 39.

95. Sargsyan, "The Bas-Reliefs," 247–50.

96. Ibid., 245–46.

97. Agathangelos, *History of the Armenians,* trans. Robert W. Thomson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1976), 321. The relevance of this account has already been noted by Der Nersessian, "L'art arménien," 58.

98. *History of the Caucasian Albanians by Movsēs Daskhurants'i,* trans. Charles J. F. Dowsett (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 121.

99. Daniel Findikyan, "The Armenian Liturgy of Dedicating a Church: A Textual and Comparative Analysis of Three Early Sources," *Orientalia Christiana Periodica* 64, no. 1 (1998): 75–121.

100. Ibid., 103.

101. Such inscriptions have been studied by Strzygowski, *Die Baukunst der Armenier,* 32–38; Greenwood, "A Corpus"; Christina Maranci, "Sacred Space: Architecture and Worship in Armenia" (paper presented at the seminar "Worship Traditions of Armenia and the Neighboring Christian East," St. Nerses Seminary, New Rochelle, N.Y., September 25–28, 2002); and idem, "Sound and Movement: Architecture and Epigraphy in Medieval Armenia" (paper presented at the Byzantine Studies Conference, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, October 28–31, 2004).

102. This assertion, which hinges on the primacy of orality in receiving the inscription, is attested in ancient, Western medieval, and, most recently, Byzantine epigraphy. For the latter as well as an up-to-date bibliography on the subject, see Amy Papalexandrou: "Text in Context:

Eloquent Monuments and the Byzantine Beholder," *Word and Image* 17, no. 3 (2001): 259–83.

103. Ibid.

104. One additionally wonders to what extent it may apply to later Armenian architecture, most particularly the elaborate relief program at the tenth-century church of Aght'amar.

105. See David H. Tuggy, "Ambiguity, Polysemy, and Vagueness," *Cognitive Linguistics* 4 (1993): 273–90. Bal and Bryson's discussion of *heteroglossia* and their critique of traditional interpretative models, "Semiotics," 203, is relevant here. For an early example of the use of this model in visual culture, see Svetlana Alpers, "Interpretation without Representation, or, the Viewing of *Las Meninas*," *Representations* 1 (1983): 31–42. Unlike Alpers, I entertain the idea here that the portals were created with the intention of multiple readings for the purposes of political strategy.

106. On the group reception of a text, see Susan Noakes, "The Fifteen Oes, the *Disticha Catonis*, Marculfius and Dick, Jane, and Sally," *University of Chicago Library Society Bulletin* 11 (1977): 10–12.

107. Sensitivity to diplomatic circumstances included not only control of dress but also informed behavior and gesture. In the medieval Transcaucasus, striking the appropriate courtly attitude did not seem to have suppressed a certain amount of creativity, as is attested in a fifth-century source describing the response of a Georgian prince on hearing that the Persian king Yazkert had granted his requests: "When Ashushay . . . received from the king this great favour, he stood up in the chamber in front of everyone; and falling to the ground he rolled this way and that, and then struck his head on the ground. In this fashion he performed his obeisance. When the king and all those in the chamber saw this, they were greatly astonished at what the man was doing. The king asked him: 'Bdeashkh of Georgia, what is this new performance that you have shown us today?' Ashushay replied: 'Benevolent monarch, you have granted me an unprecedented favour which no other subject among my companions had ever gained from you. So it is right for me to do obeisance to you with a new form of prostration, such obeisance as you have never seen from any other subject.'" *The History of Łazar P'arpec'i*, trans. Robert W. Thomson (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991), 158. Recording what appears to be a variant of *proskynesis*, the passage is highly comic from a modern perspective; I wonder whether it was not intended as a deliberate parody, reflecting that the concept of diplomatic decorum was profoundly embedded.

108. *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, 88.

109. Paraphrased from Clanchy, *From Memory*, 7.

110. *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, 142.

111. Ibid., 118.

112. *Nor Baregirk' Haykakan Lezui* (Erevan: Erevan Hamalsarani Hratarach'ut'un, 1981), vol. 2, 542.

113. See Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Janet Coleman, *Ancient and Medieval Memories: Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and a discussion of memory and architecture in Linda Seidel, *Legends in Limestone*, 73–78.

114. See Greenwood, "A Corpus," 243.

115. *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, 111, as well as 69, 135. For discussion of this method of chronometry, see Greenwood, "A Corpus," 42–54.

116. This practice may be compared with the development of elaborate dating systems in medieval English documents. See Clanchy, *From Memory*, 236.

117. Greenwood, "A Corpus," 70.

118. *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, 90.

119. Greenwood, "A Corpus," 44.

120. Ibid.

121. Ibid., 45.

122. Ibid.

123. Ibid., 44–46.

124. Ibid., 81–82.

125. Ibid., 86–87.

126. Bierman, *Writing Signs*.

127. *Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, 142.

128. Seidel, *Legends in Limestone*, 78.

129. For a series of studies relating to text and image interaction in the Middle Ages, see *Word and Image* 5 (1998). These essays, however, focus on the exegetical and discursive rather than the subversive function of text on image.

130. For a summary of the roles of medieval epigraphy in the Latin West, see Robert Favreau, "Fonctions des inscriptions au Moyen Âge," *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* 32 (1989): 203–32; and idem, *Les inscriptions médiévales: Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1985). For a study of epigraphy and patronage, see John Higgitt, "Odda, Orm and Others: Patrons and Inscriptions in Later Anglo-Saxon England," *Deerhurst Lecture* 1999 (Bristol: J. W. Arrowsmith, 2004). For Byzantium, see the study and bibliography of Papalexandrou, "Text in Context." On the subject of building as text in Byzantium, see Bissera Pentcheva, "Visual Textuality: The 'Logos' as Pregnant Body and Building," *Res* 45 (2004): 225–38. For the Islamic world, see Bierman, *Writing Signs*; Oleg Grabar, *The Mediation of Ornament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Yasser Tabaa, *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2001), 53–72; and Gülru Necipoğlu, "The Life of an Imperial Monument: Hagia Sophia after Byzantium," in *Hagia Sophia from the Age of Justinian to the Present*, ed. Robert Mark and Ahmet Ş. Çakmak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 195–226.

131. As in the inscriptions of Constantine and Charlemagne. See Kendall, *Allegory of the Church*, 21–23, 43. Public inscriptions also operated, of course, within the context of devotion, serving as invitations to penitence or invocations to prayer, as, for instance, on the early crosses of Britain and Ireland. Such functions, moreover, often pertained simultaneously within a given text or could have toggled back and forth, depending on the circumstances of reception. John Higgitt, "Words and Crosses: The Inscribed Stone Cross in Early Medieval Britain and Ireland," in *Early Medieval Sculpture in Britain and Ireland*, BAR British Series, 152 (Oxford: B.A.R., 1986), 125–52.

132. Christine B. Verzar, "Text and Image in North Italian Romanesque Sculpture," in *The Romanesque Frieze and Its Spectator*, ed. Deborah Kahn (London: Harvey Miller, 1992), 135.

133. Kendall, *Allegory of the Church*, 165.

134. This seems precisely the opposite of Michael Camille's characterization of medieval manuscripts, in which the presence of language "rescues the image from ambiguity." Camille, "Seeing and Reading: Some Visual Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy," *Art History* 8 (1985): 34.

135. Bierman, *Writing Signs*, 108.

136. Ibid., 112.

1→ Karen Rose Mathews, "Reading Romanesque Sculpture: The Iconography and Reception of the South Portal Sculpture at Santiago de Compostela," *Gesta* 39, no. 1 (2000): 3–12.

138. Ibid.

139. Bierman, *Writing Signs*, xi.

140. Those Armenian viewers without such instruction might well assume that the text was a record of foundation, in light of the numerous exterior inscriptions that functioned in this way in the region.

141. Here I paraphrase the term "contextual literacy," introduced by Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole in *The Psychology of Literacy* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981) and used by Bierman, *Writing Signs*, 26–27, in which the author explores how public texts could convey messages to diverse audiences. The question of Armenian-Greek bilingualism is extremely difficult to assess. One may nevertheless note Sebeos's remark that the Armenian patriarch Nersēs "studied the language of the Greeks," suggesting that knowledge of Greek was unusual for Armenians in the seventh century (*Armenian History Attributed to Sebeos*, 140). On the use and function of Greek epigraphy on Armenian monuments, see Maranci, "Byzantium through Armenian Eyes."

142. See Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture*, 327. Krautheimer interprets Armenian architecture as "torn between two conflicting concepts: that of the Early Christian Near East, conservative and ever bound to Roman provincial custom, and that of Justinian's Byzantium, immensely fresh and progressive" (ibid.). This additive view seems based on the long-held interpretation of Armenia as a "crossroads culture." Garsoïan, "Frontier/Frontiers?" 352, has recently offered a more helpful perspective of Armenia worth repeating here: "not only as a corridor of transit and transmission or a mere no man's land and theatre for military operations to be seen only from the distant perspective of its ultimate overlords, but on its own terms, as a separate entity."